

issue under study, and subgroups under analysis (e.g. gender, age groups). Estimated prevalence can be extrapolated from previous research, a review of clinical notes, or expert/consensus opinion. Second, the most desirable method of sampling is random sampling, using a random number generator within a known population source, such as electoral roll, current university undergraduate student email list, or sporting club member lists. This type of sampling increases the representativeness of the sample, meaning that if the same population was surveyed using a different sample, similar responses would likely be obtained.

### Response rates

Response rates can frustrate survey research. A Consort diagram (commonly used in experimental research reporting to track sample recruitment, exclusions, and drop outs) is also useful in surveys ([www.consort-statement.org](http://www.consort-statement.org)). High quality, publishable survey research is no different from experimental research in that it requires responses from a high proportion (perhaps at least 85%) of the sample (Gillham 2004). Concerns regarding survey non-respondents relate to potential differences in answers between those who did and did not respond. Maximised response rates can occur when surveys are administered directly (face-to-face, or over the telephone). In remotely delivered surveys (electronically, by post), it is more difficult to maximise responses, as researchers may not know why surveys are not returned. Obtaining reasons behind non-responses assists in understanding whether the non-respondents differ from respondents in the answers that they would have provided to the survey.

**Example.** Common reasons for non-responses include:

- Do not consent, or wish, to complete the survey (true non-responders).
- Willing, but unable, to complete the survey in its current form—may have responded had the survey been delivered by telephone, email or in person (lost responders).
- Unable to complete the survey because the survey was not received (lost potential responders).

When surveys are delivered remotely responses may be maximised by sending reminder notices or repeat surveys, and by contacting non-responders directly to find out about survey non-completion and to offer delivery of the survey in another manner. All these follow-up methods are however, time-consuming and expensive, potentially threaten subject anonymity, and may not increase the response rate significantly.

### Summary

This Research Note has outlined briefly some of the many issues that require consideration when using surveys as research data collection tools. While surveys offer a valuable data collection method, they require careful consideration at design, application, and analysis stages to ensure reporting of valid and reliable data from a sample of respondents who are representative of the population of interest.

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## Correction

### Research Note Vol 51 No 2

de Vet HCW, Verhagen AP, Logghe I and Ostelo RWJG: Literature research: Aims and design of systematic reviews.

The legend to the Y axis in Figure 1 should read: **Magnitude of effect**

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The Editor apologises for the incorrect information.